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# **Introduction:**

## **Becoming and Unbecoming Farm Workers in Southern Africa**

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Recent strikes on fruit and wine farms in South Africa's Western Cape once again drew attention to farm workers' struggles for security, decent working conditions and pay. But they also highlighted the gap between anachronistic stereotypes about feudal estates and the current reality of precarious contracted labour, raising important questions about what the category 'farm worker' even denotes. Indeed, away from media attention and across the Southern African region, livelihoods on commercial farms have changed markedly, even as the label 'farm worker' operates as a powerful tool both for claim-making and for marginalisation. If it is imperative to revisit what anthropologists and other analysts mean by 'farm workers', understanding lives on the ground begs still further questions. How do people whose lives and livelihoods revolve around farms come to be recognised as 'farm workers', with all the negative stereotypes but also the claim-making potential associated with this identity? How are farm workers made, through modes of incorporation on estates, employers' approaches to hierarchy and managerial practice, and processes of external monitoring? How do people become – or unbecome – 'farm workers'?

Asking such questions requires that we avoid an over-emphasis on a narrow rubric of 'labour relations'. Ferguson (2013a) has foregrounded the question of 'how to do things with land' in Southern Africa, suggesting that we attend to its place not only in production, but also in distribution. This signals the importance of recognising land whose primary purpose might not be growing anything. Such a view, however, is equally important on farms that are hubs of production. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given large-scale agriculture's imbrication in histories of colonialism and white settlement, they are spaces of broader significance. Southern Africa's commercial farms have characteristically been homes and nodes in kinship networks at the same time as being capitalist enterprises. The imbrication of domestic lives and global circuits of capital powerfully shapes the lives not only of adults, but also of children in various gradations of employment (e.g. Levine 2013). This immersion in farm worlds, especially where residence is on-site, often renders farms places of education, from formal schooling to the acquisition of habitus.

Agriculture across different countries in the region has exhibited remarkably similar features.<sup>1</sup> Farmer paternalism, and the all-encompassing, starkly racialised character of resident farm hierarchies (Du Toit 1993), have been explored in a number of ways in these different settings. In the South African Cape, the notion of workforces as extended families, with intermediary senior male father figures under ultimate white authority, was initially a legacy of slavery (e.g. Levine 2013; Waldman 1996). In Zimbabwe, where farming lacked such a history of slavery, similar hierarchies resulted from norms of 'domestic government'

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<sup>1</sup> I focus here on parallels between South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia, because this reflects the range of case studies in the special issue. Needless to say, there are equally important histories of settler agriculture and farm workers in other countries in the region. For example, despite Mozambique's distinct revolutionary and post-revolutionary history, technical discourses of production disguise and sustain long-established, gendered and racialised farm hierarchies (Lazzarini 2017), in ways that parallel the countries focused on here.

(Rutherford 2001). Such arrangements of hierarchy and indirect rule – not only in Zimbabwe but also in other regions of South Africa – emerged in part from the slow shift from forms of tenancy and clientage into wage labour (e.g. Phimister 1988; van Onselen 1996). And they were the pragmatic result of white settlers attempting to exert control over much larger indigenous populations. In Namibia, early twentieth-century attempts to recruit workers were inflected by settler fantasies and fears about ‘wild’ Bushmen in need of ‘taming’, in the wake of attempts at genocide (Gordon, this issue). This was nevertheless a precursor to the blurring of kinship and labour idioms, work and residence, in Namibia’s own racialised and gendered farmer paternalism (Sylvain 2001).

This convergence – a shared repertoire of agrarian relations – emerged despite agriculture developing at various times and in various populations. It connects seventeenth-century Huguenot farmers and their slave and indigenous workers around Cape Town, for example, with Southern Rhodesia’s influx of British servicemen and their employment of Malawian and Mozambican workers after World War Two. Labour shortages and moral panics about ‘vagrancy’ transcend differences of farming longevity and degrees of agricultural marginality (Gordon, this issue; Williams 2016). In the three countries covered in this collection – South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe – ‘farm workers’ came to be defined as a recognisable category of people through parallel entanglements of white farmer sovereignty and state policy. Employees were excluded from standard labour law, and were instead governed according to legislation framed in a ‘Masters and Servants’ register (e.g. Du Toit 2002; Rutherford 2017; Gordon, this issue).<sup>2</sup>

If the region has produced shared repertoires of agrarian relations, it has also produced complexities that render description far from straightforward. Paternalism is often the key term that organises analysis, but it has not been a stable ‘system’. As a mode of understanding on-farm relationships, it was always contested, often fragile, and its realities were far from the legitimising discourses of quasi-kinship. The fragmentation of black families amidst widespread mobility was often more typical than insular sedentarism across the generations (see Waldman, 1996). And, running again the grain of fictive kinship, farms from slavery onwards and across the region faced serious shortages of willing recruits (Bolt 2015; Gordon, this issue; Rutherford 2001; Williams 2016). Such shortages had profound effects. Van Onselen’s (1992) classic analysis of paternalism and violence, often taken as a starting point for defining these arrangements, sees their very erosion as a key driver of overt coercion. In South Africa, fixing workers in place on farms, rather than allowing periodic migration to towns for work, was in fact the result of an intensification of agrarian capitalism during the first half of the twentieth century (Morris 1976). And shortages led in extreme cases to forced and prison labour (see Bradford 1993; First 1958). Even away from such extremes, the result was at best a stunted form of paternalism. Meanwhile, paternalism could never simply be depicted as the feudal antithesis to ‘modern’ arrangements. One facet has been that it co-opted workers into projects and aspirations of modernity (see Hartnack, this issue). This, in turn, has left it especially amenable to redefinition in post-colonial and post-apartheid eras.

These shared histories of racialised paternalism – with non-contractual dimensions of employment and the entanglement of work and residence at their heart – have inflected the different trajectories that followed. They have profoundly affected farm dwellers, and the

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting, however, that defining farm labour as belonging to the domestic sphere, not to standard labour law, has not been an exclusively Southern African phenomenon (see Holmes 2013 for the United States).

very category 'farm worker'. In South Africa, the most pronounced changes to the agricultural sector have been greater integration into globalised markets, and greater concentration of operations, while entrenched inequalities remain largely intact (Bernstein 2013). This, even as farming areas become sites of tourism or elite consumption, in which current and former farm workers have had to reconsider their possibilities (see van der Waal 2014). Casualisation (e.g. Ewert and Du Toit 2005), alongside informalisation more broadly, has meant that farm employees and residents juggle multiple livelihoods with agricultural estates and rural towns as their geographical anchor. Farmers themselves, faced with more stringent labour law and keen to avoid apartheid-era stereotypes, reframe 'farm workers' as employees amenable to hiring and firing, and themselves as mere managers rather than fatherly protectors (Bolt 2013). As Gordon notes in this issue, labour law reform and the rise of tourism have similarly encouraged farmers to retrench on a large scale in Namibia (there, land redistribution has also had a significant effect). In an era of labour surplus, when people actively seek dependence on potential protectors (Ferguson 2013b), what farm employment is available no longer guarantees residence. Meanwhile, seasonal migrant labour has long predominated near South Africa's national boundaries, and since market liberalisation such migrants have proven a useful labour reserve (Johnston 2007). However, radically increased transience on the Zimbabwean border has meant that those who stop to work on farms may have markedly different degrees of commitment to their places of work or any kind of farm worker identity (Bolt forthcoming; Hall 2013). And, in extreme cases, all black employees have seasonal contracts, producing a world of hustling and virtually no investment in farm life (Addison 2013).

Conversely, state and corporate interventions have identified farms, their compounds and 'the farm worker' as sites of empowerment, development and ethical responsibility (Bolt, 2016; Mayson 1990; Kaur this issue; Swanepoel, this issue). Because of farm workers' spatial isolation and their consequent dependence on farms, the effects of legislative change have been double-edged. Some changes under the banner of human rights, unaccompanied by new livelihood opportunities, have disadvantaged farm residents by preventing economic strategies born of necessity (e.g. the banning of child labour, see Levine 2013), while farmers have blamed labour law for their retraction of discretionary benefits. On farms that have changed hands in the wake of land reform, the status of waged farm work is still less clear. There are signs that former farm workers are able to effect change in their roles as beneficiaries (Brandt 2016). But white farmers' near monopoly on managerial experience in commercial agriculture may ensure continuities with the past (Fraser 2017). In Zimbabwe, farm dwellers on estates reallocated by fast-track land reform eke out a living, using as a base the compounds in which they previously resided (Hartnack 2016; this issue). How labour, livelihoods, residence and hierarchy relate in producing today's 'farm workers' is no simple matter, even as the term itself continues to conjure images with considerable imaginative power.

A focus on becoming and unbecoming farm workers places a particular emphasis on understanding the category. At the most obvious level, it draws attention to the lives of people for whom farms are many things other than workplaces – a result of the unstable, contested legacy of paternalism already discussed. But it also draws attention to the intersection of discourse and political economy – the relationship between categorisation and material life – that shapes farm worlds. The term 'farm worker' is central in a range of projects of 'making up people', which depend as much on everyday interactions as on disciplining discourses per se (Hacking 2004). These projects include those of farmers, who draw 'workers' in on their side against the enemy beyond. In Zimbabwe, this has occurred

amidst farmers' attempts initially to avoid and subsequently to navigate the politics of land expropriation (Pilosof 2012; Rutherford 2017). In South Africa, it has included Western Cape farmers' attempts to legitimate their own positions as defenders of 'farm workers' against the effects of 'xenophobia' (Kerr and Durrheim 2013). At the same time, employees themselves have claimed the designation as entitlement to make strike demands, even in the face of marginalisation by other workers (Eriksson, this issue). And corporations along the supply chain, keen to promote 'ethical' agriculture, have foregrounded their own version of the 'farm worker' with its own parameters, as the basis for auditing processes (Swanepoel, this issue).

This special issue thus investigates precisely how the category 'farm worker' is intertwined with the actual lives and livelihoods of people who live, work and make ends meet on farms in Southern Africa. We begin with the 2012 strikes in the Western Cape, the focus of Eriksson's article. Based on an intersectional analysis, Eriksson reveals how the disproportionately female, casual and (im)migrant profile of the first strikers raised key questions about who was actually considered a farm worker. For detractors, the label was reserved for the permanent, resident and male – drawing on a historically established discourse of belonging and paternalism for legitimisation – despite a trend on Western Cape farms precisely towards female, migrant and casualised labour. The result was that prominent figures in the strikes saw their voices marginalised over time, as the experiences of those who fitted the discursive trope of 'farm workers' were accorded increasing prominence. Nevertheless, women strikers rearticulated their farm-worker identity to disrupt the stereotypes of passivity and dependence associated with it. Eriksson's article provides a fitting opening for the collection, by underlining how the very designation of the label 'farm worker' is political, with real effects on possibilities for claim-making. It also recasts questions of commitment to farmer paternalism. Attachment to particular farms, which countermands the attraction of leaving, now takes the form not only of keeping one's heading down, but also of agitating for amelioration.

The category 'farm worker' is thrown into still starker relief by taking a wider-angle view of becoming and unbecoming. Two papers do exactly this and, in the process, take us far from the Western Cape. Gordon takes us to Namibia, and back in time, to consider how 'Bushmen' there became farm workers in the first place. Here, 'becoming' was conceived as a matter of 'taming'. Making sedentary farm workers meant making semi-slave villeins. Appreciating this invites a focus less on the establishment of farms through primitive accumulation, and more on the emergence of a structure of domination and its constitutive ethos, which defined the terms of life for would-be Bushmen workers. Such structures included vagrancy laws, drawing on settler fantasies of Bushmen as wild, and a paranoid ethos of besiegement. In an era of 'bureaucratic downsizing', police and ranchers collaborated in a regime of violent arrests and periodic raiding, even as Bushmen sought dependence under farmers as protection from state officials. Amidst such bare coercion, legal rationales and rituals remained key as markers of civilisation. If the category of 'farm worker' is discursively powerful, Gordon reminds us, it was not inscribed on a blank slate. Other historical vistas are opened up by exploring the categories and stereotypes that came before. In Namibia, these created scripts and extra-economic imperatives for making farm workers.

Hartnack turns to unbecoming and its complexities, and to Zimbabwe. He asks what farm workers have become after fast-track land reform – since 2000, the majority of large, white-owned commercial farms have been expropriated and reallocated as 'small-scale peasant' or 'medium-scale commercial' plots. Many people remain in the compounds where they

previously resided, patching together livelihoods, while still regarded as farm workers and thus as the foreign lackeys of their former white bosses. Striving to distance themselves from this identity, they are often constrained by their residential patterns, lack of options, consequent reliance on existing networks, and sometimes identification through distinctly Malawian cultural practices. Moreover, some erstwhile farm workers retain their own attachments to the label and the positions of authority that they previously enjoyed. Hartnack explores in detail the lives and perspectives of formerly senior employees whose experiences were inflected by proximity to white employers. In the aftermath of land reform, a range of emotions are attached to this remembered proximity: hope of further livelihood possibilities; betrayal as intimate relationships collapse under economic and political strain; disappointment as teleological visions of agricultural 'modernity' crumble. The lingering category 'farm worker' is not merely discursive and implicated in power relations: it is also deeply affective.

The papers that follow take the terms of inquiry in different but complementary directions. Kaur examines what happens when farm workers come to be framed as development recipients, in sport-for-development initiatives. She tracks one farm worker football team, the Mountain Tigers Football Club, which moved from success in informal gambling games, to an abortive attempt at the 'mainstream' league, to participation in a government Sports Day. Each revealed how farm worker identities, and the realities of farm-dweller lives, countermanded attempts to overcome thoroughgoing marginalisation. The league held the allure of the mainstream. Yet participation proved unfeasible because of difficulties with logistics and expenses, as well as possible prejudice against farm workers. The Sports Day was an explicit development-oriented attempt to address workers' marginality but, although framed as bottom-up empowerment, its committee reflected the overwhelming influence of distant provincial government officials. More significantly for the Mountain Tigers themselves, the event was announced as a means of broader inclusion, but was in fact a friendly tournament between farm worker teams. Being mainstream was an attractive proposition, but it was through involvement in a government initiative to address marginalisation that their fundamental status as farm workers rather than football players was reinforced.

Finally, Swanepoel focuses on farm workers through the lens of ethical labour audits in South Africa. Slow change since apartheid makes international compliance difficult. An awareness of this alongside the need for unimpeded exports has produced SIZA (the Sustainability Initiative for South Africa). Although a local standard, SIZA nevertheless frames farm workers as individualised and rights-bearing according to liberal conceptions of personhood, while failing to account for their embeddedness in hierarchies and dependences. Swanepoel – herself an auditor – explores monitoring as it actually plays out. 'Rolling contracts' illustrate the uncomfortable fit between ethical idioms with global currency and those that pertain on South African farms. For auditors, the contracts retain women workers as permanently temporary. Farmers respond that they are a benefit to core male workers' families, part of a broader discretionary paternalism. Loans, meanwhile, create indebted workforces, or alternatively represent one of the few means workers have of making claims. Mirroring Levine's (2013) argument about child labour, prohibition without alternative livelihood options is dangerous. On big farms, matters are complicated by the downward delegation to supervisory workers of paternalist responsibility. The result is a compliance process that works for globalised ethical systems, but not for workers' rights.

Agrarian environments in Southern Africa knit together complex webs of power relations, identity politics and struggles over survival. Amidst diverse pressures and performances – ideological, ethical, political and economic – the notion of ‘farm worker’ is imposed, claimed and denied, and it is negotiated and transcended. Taken together, the papers in this special issue consider the range of circumstances within which farm labour and residence take on meanings well beyond the occupation itself. In turn, an emphasis on becoming and unbecoming offers a useful lens for reflection on workers in other sectors. How workers are defined – including by scholars – is especially crucial in an era of falling employment and an increasing turn to informal means of making a living. Indeed, it is central for understanding what employment does in a world where it is increasingly scarce. As we reimagine the future of work itself, ‘workers’ and ‘workplaces’ continue to be important. But their significance is not only as straightforward descriptors of economic life, but as categories with claim-making power and long shadows.

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